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THE NEGRO SOLDIER IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The facts as to the participation of Negroes in the American Revolution have received the attention of several writers. Yet not one of them has made a scientific presentation of the facts which they have discovered. These historians have failed to consider the bearing of the status of the free Negro during the colonial period, the meaning of the Revolution to the Negro, and what the service of the Negro soldiers first enlisted effected in changing the attitude of the people toward the blacks throughout the original thirteen colonies.

To a person who has lived in the nineteenth or twentieth century it would seem incredible that Negroes, the majority of whom were then slaves, should have been allowed to fight in the Continental Army. The layman here may forget that during the eighteenth century slavery was a patriarchal institution rather than the economic plantation system as it developed after the multiplication of mechanical appliances, which brought about the world-wide industrial revolution. During the eighteenth century a number of slaves brought closely into contact with their masters were gradually enlightened and later emancipated. Such freedmen, in the absence of any laws to the contrary, exercised political rights,¹ among which was that of bearing arms. Negroes served not only in the American Revolution, but in every war of consequence during the colonial period. There were masters who sent slaves to the front to do menial labor and to fight in the places of their owners. Then there were slaves who, finding it easier to take occasional chances with bullets than to bear the lash, ran away from their masters and served as privateers or enlisted as freemen.²

¹ Bancroft, "History of the United States," VIII, 110; MacMaster, "History of the United States."

² See "Documents" in this number.

The newspapers of the colonial period often mentioned these facts in their advertisements of fugitive slaves. In 1760 a master had considerable difficulty with a slave who escaped from New England into New Jersey, where he said he would enlist in the provincial service.³ Advertising for his mulatto servant, who was brought up in Rhode Island, James Richardson of Stonington said that the fugitive had served as a soldier the previous summer.⁴ A few free Negroes found their way into the colonial militia along with white soldiers. This passed, of course, not without some opposition, as in the case of Massachusetts. In 1656 that colony excluded Negroes and Indians from the militia, and according to Governor Bradstreet's report to the Board of Trade in 1680 and subsequent action taken by that colony in 1775 and 1776, it adhered to this policy.⁵

Favorable as this condition of Negroes during the colonial period seemed, the situation became still more desirable during the Revolution itself. This upheaval was social as well as political. Aristocracy was suddenly humiliated and the man in the common walks of life found himself in power, grappling with problems which he had long desired to solve. Sprung from the indentured servant poor white class, the new rulers had more sympathy for the man farthest down. The slaves, therefore, received more consideration. In the heat of the excitement of war the system lost almost all of its rigor, the slave codes in some cases falling into desuetude. The contest for liberty was in the mouths of some orators of the Revolution the cause of the blacks as well as that of the whites, and the natural rights of the former were openly discussed in urging the independence of the United States. When men like Laurens, Henry, Hamilton and Otis spoke for the rights of the American colonies, they were not silent on the duty of the American people toward their slaves.⁶

³ *The New York Gazette*, Aug. 11, 1760.

⁴ Supplement to the *Boston Evening Post*, May 23, 1763.

⁵ Moore's "Slavery in Mass.," 243; Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., VII, 336.

⁶ Adams, "Works of John Adams," X, 315; Moore, "Notes on Slavery in Mass.," 71. Hamilton, Letter to Jay, March 14, 1779.

In 1774 a patriot in the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts spoke of the "propriety, that while we are attempting to free ourselves from slavery, our present embarrassments, and preserve ourselves from slavery, that we also take into consideration the state and circumstances of the Negro slaves in this province." ⁷

When the Revolution came the Negro was actually in the army before the question of his enlistment could be raised by those who had not yet been won to the cause of universal freedom. Feeling the same patriotism which the white man experienced, the Negro bared his breast to the bullet and gave his life as a sacrifice for the liberty of his country. According to Bancroft, "the roll of the army of Cambridge had from its first formation borne the names of men of color." "Free Negroes," said he, "stood in the ranks by the side of white men. In the beginning of the war they had entered the provincial army; the first general order which was issued by Ward had required a return, among other things, of the complexion of the soldiers; and black men, like others, were retained in the service after the troops were adopted by the continent." ⁸

Before the various officials had had time to decide whether or not the Negro should be enlisted, many had numbered themselves among the first to spill their blood in behalf of American liberty. Peter Salem had distinguished himself at Bunker Hill by killing Major Pitcairn,⁹ a number of other Negroes under the command of Major Samuel Lawrence had heroically imperilled their lives and rescued him when he had advanced so far beyond his troops that he was about to be surrounded and taken prisoner,¹⁰ and Salem Poor of Colonel Frye's regiment had acquitted himself with such honor in the battle of Charlestown that fourteen American officers commended him to the Continental Congress for

⁷ Moore, "Historical Notes on the Employment of Negroes in the American Revolution," 4.

⁸ Bancroft, "History of the United States," VIII, 110.

⁹ Washburn, "History of Leicester," 267.

¹⁰ Washington, "The Story of the Negro," I, 315.

for his valor.¹¹ But great as were the services rendered by these patriots of color, the increase in the number of blacks in the Continental Army gave rise to vexatious questions. There were those who, influenced by the theories which had made the Revolution possible, hailed with joy the advent of the Negro in the rôle of the defender of his country, which they believed owed him freedom and opportunity. Some, having the idea that the Negro was a savage, too stupid to be employed in fighting the battles of freemen, seriously objected to his enlistment. Others were fearful of the result from setting the example of employing an uncivilized people to fight the British, who would then have an excuse not only for enlisting Negroes¹² but also the Indians. A still larger number felt that the question of arming the slaves would simply reduce itself to one of deciding whether or not the colonies should permit the British to beat them playing their own game.¹³

In the beginning, however, those who believed the Negroes should be excluded from the army triumphed. Massachusetts officially took a stand against the enlistment of slaves. The Committee of Safety, of which John Hancock and Joseph Ward were members, reported in May, 1775, to the Provincial Congress the opinion that as the contest then between Great Britain and her colonies respected the liberties and privileges of the latter, that the admission of any persons but freemen as soldiers would be inconsistent with the principles supported and would reflect dishonor on the colony.¹⁴ They urged that no slaves be admitted into the army under any consideration whatever. No action was taken. This was not seemingly directed at the enlistment of free Negroes; but it must have had some effect, for in July of the same year, when Washington took command of the army at Cambridge, there were issued from his headquarters to recruiting officers instructions prohibiting the

¹¹ Manuscript, Massachusetts Archives, CLXXX, 241.

¹² Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, pp. 221, 263; 1776, pp. 60, 874; 1779, pp. 386, 418.

¹³ Ford, "Washington's Writings," VIII, 371.

¹⁴ Journal of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, 553.

enlistment of any Negro, any person not native of this country, unless such person had a wife and a family and was a settled resident.¹⁵

This matter became one of such concern that the officials of the Continental Army had to give it more serious consideration. Communications relative thereto directed to the Continental Congress provoked a debate in that body in September, 1775. On the occasion of drafting a letter to Washington, reported by a committee consisting of Lynch, Lee and Adams, to whom several of his communications had been referred, Rutledge, of South Carolina, moved that the commander-in-chief be instructed to discharge from the army all Negroes, whether slave or free.¹⁶ It seems that Rutledge had the support of the Southern delegates, but failed to secure a majority vote in favor of this radical proposition.

The matter was not yet settled, however. On the eighth of the following month there was held a council of war consisting of Washington, Ward, Lee, Putnam, Thomas, Spencer, Heath, Sullivan, Greene and Gates, to consider the question whether or not it would be advisable to enlist Negroes in the new army or "whether there be any distinction between such as are slaves and those who are free." It was unanimously agreed to reject all slaves and by a large majority to refuse Negroes altogether.¹⁷ Upon considering ten days later the question of devising a method of renovating the army, however, the question of enlisting Negroes came up again before a Committee of Conference. The leaders in this council were Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Lynch, the Deputy Governors of Connecticut and Rhode Island, and the Committee of Council of Massachusetts Bay. They were asked the question whether Negroes should be excluded from the new enlistment, especially such as were slaves. This council also agreed that Negroes should be rejected altogether.¹⁸ Accordingly, the general

¹⁵ Moore, "Historical Notes," 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

orders from Washington, dated November 12, 1775, declared that neither Negroes, boys unable to bear arms, nor old men unfit to endure fatigues of the campaign should be enlisted.

The men who had taken this position had acted blindly. They had failed to consider the various complications which might arise as a result of the refusal to admit Negroes to the army. What would the Negroes think when they saw their offering thrown away from the altar of their country? Were the Revolutionary fathers so stupid as to think that the British would adopt the same policy? They could not have believed that the situation could be so easily cleared. Before the Revolution was well on its way the delegates from Georgia to the Continental Congress had already experienced certain fears as to the safety of Georgia and South Carolina. They believed that if one thousand regular troops should land in Georgia under a commander with adequate supplies and he should proclaim freedom to all loyal Negroes, twenty thousand of them would join the British in a fortnight. It was to them a matter of much concern that the Negroes of these provinces had such a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves as to convey information several hundred miles in a week or in a fortnight.¹⁹ The colonists, too, could not ignore the bold attempt of Lord Dunmore, the dethroned governor of Virginia, who issued a proclamation of freedom to all slaves who would fight for the king, endeavored to raise a black regiment among them, and actually used a number of Negroes in the battle at Kemp's Landing, where they behaved like well-seasoned soldiers, pursuing and capturing one of the attacking companies.²⁰ Referring thereafter to Lord Dunmore as an arch-traitor who should be instantly crushed, George Washington said: "But that which renders the measure indispensably necessary is the Negroes, if he gets formidable numbers of them, will be tempted to join" him.

Subsequent developments showed that these misgivings were justified. In July, 1776, General Greene learned on

¹⁹ Adams's Works, II, 428.

²⁰ Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed, I, 135.

Long Island that the British were about to organize in that vicinity a regiment of Negroes aggregating 200.²² Taking as a pretext the enrollment of Negroes in the Continental Army, Sir Henry Clinton proclaimed from Philipsburgh in 1779 that all Negroes taken in arms or upon any military duty should be purchased from the captors for the public service, and that every Negro who would desert the "Rebel Standard" should have full security to follow within the British lines any occupation which he might think proper.²³ In 1781 General Greene reported to Washington from North Carolina that the British there had undertaken to embody immediately two regiments of Negroes.²⁴ They were operating just as aggressively farther South. "It has been computed by good judges," says Ramsey, "that between the years 1775 and 1783 the State of South Carolina lost 25,000 Negroes,²⁵ that is, one fifth of all the slaves, and a little more than half as many as its entire white population. At the evacuation of Charleston 241 Negroes and their families were taken off to St. Lucia in one transport, the Scimitar."²⁶ Yet in Georgia it is believed that the loss of Ne-

²² Force, American Archives, I, 486. Fifth Series.

²³ "By his Excellency, Sir HENRY CLINTON, K.B., General and Commander-in-Chief of all His Majesty's Forces within the Colonies lying on the Atlantic Ocean, from Nova Scotia to West Florida, inclusive, etc.

"PROCLAMATION

"Whereas, The Enemy have adopted a practice of enrolling NEGROES among their troops: I do hereby give Notice, that all NEGROES taken in Arms, or upon any military Duty shall be purchased for the public service at a stated price; the Money to be paid to the Captors.

"But I do most strictly forbid any Person to sell or claim Right over any Negroe, the Property of a Rebel, who may take refuge with any part of this Army: And I do promise to every Negroe who shall desert the Rebel Standard full Security to follow within these Lines any occupation which he may think proper.

"Given under my Hand at Head-Quarters,
Philipsburgh, the 30th day of June 1779.

H. CLINTON.

By his Excellency's Comman,
JOHN SMITH, Secretary."

²⁴ The Journal of the Continental Congress, II, 26.

²⁵ Ramsay, "The History of South Carolina" [Edition, 1809], I, 474-475.

²⁶ *The Gazette of the State of South Carolina*, Nov. 22, 1784.

groes was much greater, probably three fourths or seven eighths of all in the State. There the British were more successful in organizing and making use of Negroes. One third of the 600 men by whom Fort Cornwallis was garrisoned at the siege of Augusta were Negroes. So effective were some of these Negroes trained by the British in Georgia that a corps of fugitive slaves calling themselves the "King of England's Soldiers," so harassed the people on both sides of the Savannah River, even after the Revolution, that it was feared that a general insurrection of the slaves there would follow as a result of this most dangerous and best disciplined band of marauders that ever infested its borders.²⁷

The leaders of the Revolution, therefore, quickly receded from their radical position of excluding Negroes from the army. Informed that the free Negroes who had served in the ranks in New England were sorely displeased at their exclusion from the service, and fearing that they might join the enemy, Washington departed, late in 1775, from the established policy of the staff and gave the recruiting officers leave to accept such Negroes, promising to lay the matter before the Continental Congress, which he did not doubt would approve it.²⁸ Upon the receipt of this communication the matter was referred to a committee composed of Wythe, Adams and Wilson, who recommended that free Negroes who had served faithfully in the army at Cambridge might be reenlisted but no others.²⁹ In taking action on such communications thereafter the Continental Congress followed the policy of leaving the matter to the various States, which were then jealously mindful of their rights.

Sane leaders generally approved the enlistment of black troops. General Thomas thought so well of the proposition that he wrote John Adams in 1775, expressing his surprise that any prejudice against it should exist.³⁰ Samuel Hop-

²⁷ Moore, "Historical Notes," 14.

²⁸ Sparks, "Washington's Works," III, 218.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Letter of General Thomas to John Adams, Oct. 24, 1775.

kins said in 1776 that something should be speedily done with respect to the slaves to prevent their turning against the Americans. He was of the opinion that the way to counteract the tendency of the Negroes to join the British was not to restrain them by force and severity but by public acts to set the slaves free and encourage them to labor and take arms in defense of the American cause.³¹ Interested in favor of the Negroes both by "the dictates of humanity and true policy," Hamilton urged that slaves be given their freedom with the swords to secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and influence those remaining in bondage by opening a door to their emancipation.³² General Greene emphatically urged that blacks be armed, believing that they would make good soldiers.³³ Thinking that the slaves might be put to a much better use than being given as a bounty to induce white men to enlist, James Madison suggested that the slaves be liberated and armed.³⁴ "It would certainly be consonant to the principles of liberty," said he, "which ought never to be lost sight of in a contest for liberty." John Laurens, of South Carolina, was among the first to see the wisdom of this plan, directed the attention of his co-workers to it, and when authorized by the Continental Congress, proceeded to his native State, wishing that he had the persuasive power of a Demosthenes to make his fellow citizens accept this proposition.³⁵ In 1779 Laurens said: "I would advance those who are unjustly deprived of the rights of mankind to a state which would be a proper gradation between abject slavery and perfect liberty, and besides I am persuaded that if I could obtain authority for the purpose, I would have a corps of such men trained, uniformly clad, equipped and ready in every respect to act at the opening of the next campaign."

All of the colonies thereafter tended to look more favor-

³¹ Moore, "Historical Notes," 4.

³² Hamilton's "Works," I, 76-78.

³³ Moore, "Historical Notes," 13.

³⁴ Madison's Papers, 68.

³⁵ Letter of Hamilton to Jay, March 14, 1779; and Journals of the Continental Congress.

ably upon the enlistment of colored troops. Free Negroes enlisted in Virginia and so many slaves deserted their masters for the army that the State enacted in 1777 a law providing that no Negro should be enlisted unless he had a certificate of freedom.³⁶ That commonwealth, however, soon took another step toward greater recognition of the rights of the Negroes who desired to be free to help maintain the honor of the State. With the promise of freedom for military service many slaves were sent to the army as substitutes for freemen. The effort of inhuman masters to force such Negroes back into slavery at the close of their service at the front actuated the liberal legislators of that commonwealth to pass the Act of Emancipation, proclaiming freedom to all Negroes who had thus enlisted and served their term faithfully, and empowered them to sue *in forma pauperis*, should they thereafter be unlawfully held in bondage.³⁷

In the course of time there arose an urgent need for the Negro in the army. The army reached the point when almost all sorts of soldiers were acceptable. In 1778 General Varnum induced General Washington to send certain officers from Valley Forge to Rhode Island to enlist a battalion of Negroes to fill the depleted ranks of that State.³⁸ Setting forth in the preamble that "history affords us frequent precedents of the wisest, freest and bravest nations having liberated their slaves and enlisted them as soldiers to fight in defense of their country," the Rhode Island Assembly resolved to raise a regiment of slaves, who were to be freed upon their enlistment, their owners to be paid by the State according to the valuation of a committee. Further light was thrown upon this action in the statement of Governor Cooke, who in reporting the action of the Assembly to Washington boasted that liberty was given to every effective slave to don the uniform and that upon his passing muster he

³⁶ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, IX, 280.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, XI, 308, 309.

³⁸ Rhode Island Colonial Records, VIII, 640, 641.

became absolutely free and entitled to all the wages, bounties and encouragements given to any other soldier.³⁹

The State of New Hampshire enlisted Negroes and gave to those who served three years the same bounty offered others. This bounty was turned over to their masters as the price of the slaves in return for which their owners issued bills of sale and certificates of freedom.⁴⁰ In this way slavery practically passed out in New Hampshire. This affair did not proceed so smoothly as this in Massachusetts. In 1778 that legislature had a committee report in favor of raising a regiment of mulattoes and Negroes. This action was taken as a result upon receiving an urgent letter from Thomas Kench, a member of an artillery regiment serving on Castle Island. Kench referred to the fact that there were divers of Negroes in the battalions mixed with white men, but he thought that the blacks would have a better esprit de corps should they be organized in companies by themselves. But the feeling that slaves should not fight the battles of freemen and a confusion of the question of enlistment with that of emancipation for which Massachusetts was not then prepared,⁴¹ led to a heated debate in the Massachusetts Council and finally to blows in the coffee houses in lower Boston. In such an excited state of affairs no further action was taken. Finding recruiting difficult it is said that Connecticut undertook to raise a colored regiment⁴² and in 1781 New York, offering the usual land bounty which would go to the masters to purchase the slaves, promised freedom to all slaves who would enlist for the time of three years.⁴³ Maryland provided in 1780 that each unit of £16,000 of property should furnish one recruit who might be either a freeman or a slave, and in 1781 resolved to raise 750 Negroes to be incorporated with the other troops.⁴⁴

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 358-360.

⁴⁰ Moore, "Historical Notes," 19.

⁴¹ Manuscripts in the Archives of Massachusetts, CXCIX, 80.

⁴² Moore, "Historical Notes," 20.

⁴³ Laws of the State of New York, Chapter XXXII, Fourth Session.

⁴⁴ Sparks, "Correspondence of the American Revolution," III, 331.

Farther South the enlistment of Negroes had met with obstacles. The best provision the Southern legislatures had been able to make was to provide in addition to the allotment of money and land that a person offering to fight for the country should have "one sound Negro"⁴⁵ or a "healthy sound Negro"⁴⁶ as the laws provided in Virginia and South Carolina respectively. Threatened with invasion in 1779, however, the Southern States were finally compelled to consider this matter more seriously.⁴⁷ The Continental Army

⁴⁵ Moore, "Historical Notes," 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁷ Taking up the Southern situation, Hamilton in 1779 wrote Jay as follows:

"*Dear Sir:* Colonel Laurens, who will have the honor of delivering you this letter, is on his way to South Carolina, on a project which I think, in the present situation of affairs there, is a very good one, and deserves every kind of support and encouragement. This is, to raise two, three, or four battalions of negroes, with the assistance of the government of that State, by contributions from the owners, in proportion to the number they possess. If you should think proper to enter upon the subject with him, he will give you a detail of his plan. He wishes to have it recommended by Congress to the State; and, as an inducement, that they would engage to take their battalions into Continental pay.

"It appears to me, that an expedient of this kind, in the present state of Southern affairs, is the most rational that can be adopted, and promises very important advantages. Indeed, I hardly see how a sufficient force can be collected in that quarter without it: and the enemy's operations there are growing infinitely serious and formidable. I have not the least doubt, that the negroes will make very excellent soldiers with proper management: and I will venture to pronounce, that they cannot be put in better hands than those of Mr. Laurens. He has all the zeal, intelligence, enterprise, and every other qualification, requisite to succeed in such an undertaking. It is a maxim with some great military judges, that, with sensible officers, soldiers can hardly be too stupid; and, on this principle, it is thought that the Russians would make the best soldiers in the world, if they were under other officers than their own. The King of Prussia is among the number who maintain this doctrine, and has a very emphatic saying on the occasion, which I do not exactly recollect. I mention this because I have frequently heard it objected to the scheme of embodying negroes, that they are too stupid to make soldiers. This is so far from appearing to me a valid objection, that I think their want of cultivation (for their natural faculties are as good as ours), joined to that habit of subordination which they acquire from a life of servitude will enable them sooner to become soldiers than our white inhabitants. Let officers be men of sense and sentiment, and the nearer the soldiers approach to machines, perhaps the better.

had been called upon to cope with the situation but had no force available for service in those parts. The three battalions of North Carolina troops, then on duty in the South,

"I foresee that this project will have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest. The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable a kind, will furnish a thousand arguments to show the impracticability, or pernicious tendency, of a scheme which requires such sacrifices. But it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will; and that the best way to counteract the temptations they will hold out, will be to offer them ourselves. An essential part of the plan is, to give them their freedom with their swords. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and, I believe, will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation.

"This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favor of this unfortunate class of men.

"While I am on the subject of Southern affairs, you will excuse the liberty I take in saying, that I do not think measures sufficiently vigorous are pursuing for our defence in that quarter. Except the few regular troops of South Carolina, we seem to be relying wholly on the militia of that and two neighboring States. These will soon grow impatient of service and leave our affairs in a miserable situation. No considerable force can be uniformly kept up by militia, to say nothing of the many obvious and well-known inconveniences that attend this kind of troops. I would beg leave to suggest, sir, that no time ought to be lost in making a draught of militia to serve a twelve-month, from the States of North and South Carolina and Virginia. But South Carolina, being very weak in her population of whites, may be excused from the draught, on condition of furnishing the black battalions. The two others may furnish about three thousand five hundred men, and be exempted, on that account, from sending any succor to this army. The States to the northward of Virginia, will be fully able to give competent supplies to the army here; and it will require all the force and exertions of the three States I have mentioned, to withstand the storm which has arisen, and is increasing in the South.

"The troops draughted, must be thrown into battalions, and officered in the best possible manner. The best supernumerary officers may be made use of as far as they will go. If arms are wanted for their troops, and no better way of supplying them is to be found, we should endeavor to levy a contribution of arms upon the militia at large. Extraordinary exigencies demand extraordinary means. I fear this Southern business will become a very *grave* one.

"With the truest respect and esteem,

I am, sir, your most obedient servant,

ALEX. HAMILTON."

consisted of drafts from the militia for nine months, which would expire before the end of the campaign. What were they to do then when this militia, which could not be uniformly kept up, should grow impatient with the service? Writing from the headquarters of the army at this time, Alexander Hamilton in discussing the advisability of this plan doubtless voiced the sentiment of the staff. He thought that Colonel Laurens's plan for raising three or four battalions of emancipated Negroes was the most rational one that could be adopted in that state of Southern affairs. Hamilton foresaw the opposition from prejudice and self-interest, but insisted that if the Americans did not make such a use of the Negroes, the British would.

The movement received further impetus when special envoys from South Carolina headed by Huger appeared before the Continental Congress on March 29, 1779, to impress upon that body the necessity of doing something to relieve the Southern colonies. South Carolina, they reported, was suffering from an exposed condition in that the number of slaves being larger than that of the whites, she was unable to effect anything for its defense with the natives, because of the large number necessary to remain at home to prevent insurrections among the Negroes and their desertion to the enemy. These representatives, therefore, suggested that there might be raised among the Negroes in that State a force "which would not only be formidable to the enemy from their numbers and the discipline of which they would readily admit but would also lessen the danger from revolts and desertions by detaching the most vigorous and enterprising from among the Negroes." At the same time the Committee expressed the opinion that a matter of such vital interest to the two States concerned should be referred to their legislative bodies to judge as to the expediency of taking this step, and that if these commonwealths found it satisfactory that the United States should defray the expenses.

Congress passed a resolution complying with these recom-

mendations.⁴⁸ Laurens, the father of the movement, was made a lieutenant-colonel and he went immediately home to urge upon South Carolina the expediency of adopting this plan. There Laurens met determined opposition from the majority of the aristocrats who set themselves against "a measure of so threatening aspect and so offensive to that republican pride, which disdains to commit the defence of the country to servile bands or share with a color to which the idea of inferiority is inseparably connected, the pro-

⁴⁸ The resolutions of Congress were as follows:

"*Resolved*, That it be recommended to the States of South Carolina and Georgia, if they shall think the same expedient, to take measures immediately for raising three thousand able-bodied negroes.

"That the said negroes be formed into separate corps, as battalions, according to the arrangements adopted for the main army, to be commanded by white commissioned and non-commissioned officers.

"That the commissioned officers be appointed by the said States.

"That the non-commissioned officers may, if the said States respectively shall think proper, be taken from among the non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the continental battalions of the said States respectively.

"That the Governors of the said States, together with the commanding officer of the Southern army, be empowered to incorporate the several continental battalions of their States with each other respectively, agreeably to the arrangement of the army, as established by the resolutions of May 27, 1778; and to appoint such of the supernumerary officers to command the said negroes, as shall choose to go into that service.

"*Resolved*, That Congress will make provision for paying the proprietors of such Negroes as shall be enlisted for the service of the United States during the war, a full compensation for the property, at a rate not exceeding one thousand dollars for each active, able-bodied negro man of standard size, not exceeding thirty-five years of age, who shall be so enlisted and pass muster.

"That no pay or bounty be allowed to the said negroes; but that they be clothed and subsisted at the expense of the United States.

"That every negro, who shall well and faithfully serve as a soldier to the end of the present war, and shall return his arms, be emancipated, and receive the sum of fifty dollars."

In connection with this Congress passed also the following resolution:

"WHEREAS John Laurens, Esq., who has heretofore acted as aide-de-camp to the commander-in-chief, is desirous of repairing to South Carolina, with a design to assist in defence of the Southern States:

"*Resolved*, That a commission of lieutenant-colonel be granted to the said John Laurens, Esq."

Journals of the Continental Congress, 1779, pp. 386, 418.

fession of arms, and that approximation of condition which must exist between the regular soldier and the militiaman." It was to no purpose too that Laurens renewed his efforts at a later period. He mustered all of his energy to impress upon the Legislature the need of taking this action but finally found himself outvoted, having only reason on his side and "being opposed by a triple-headed monster that shed the baneful influence of avarice, prejudice, and pusillanimity in all our assemblies." "It was some consolation to me, however," said he, "to find that philosophy and truth had made some little progress since my last effort, as I obtained twice as many suffrages as before."

Hearing of the outcome, Washington wrote him that he was not at all astonished at it, as that spirit of freedom, which at the commencement of the Revolution would have sacrificed everything to the attainment of this object, had long since subsided, and every selfish passion had taken its place. "It is not the public but the private interest," said he, "which influences the generality of mankind, nor can Americans any longer boast an exception. Under these circumstances it would have been rather surprising if you had succeeded."⁴⁹ It is difficult, however, to determine exactly what Washington's attitude was. Two days after Hamilton wrote Jay about raising colored troops in South Carolina, the elder Laurens wrote Washington: "Had we arms for three thousand such black men as I could select in Carolina, I should have no doubt of success in driving the British out of Georgia, and subduing East Florida before the end of July." To this Washington answered: "The policy of our arming slaves is in my opinion a moot point, unless the enemy set the example. For, should we begin to form Battalions of them, I have not the smallest doubt, if the war is to be prosecuted, of their following us in it, and justifying the measure upon our own ground. The contest then must be who can arm fastest, and where are our arms? Besides I am not clear that a discrimination will not render slavery more irksome to those who remain in it. Most of the good

⁴⁹ Sparks, "Writings of Washington," VIII, 322, 323.

and evil things in this life are judged by comparison; and I fear a comparison in this case will be productive of much discontent in those, who are held in servitude. But, as this is a subject that has never employed much of my thoughts, these are no more than the first crude Ideas that have struck me upon ye occasion.”⁵⁰

What then resulted from the agitation and discussion? The reader naturally wants to know how many Negroes were actually engaged in the Continental Army. Here we find ourselves at sea. We have any amount of evidence that the number of Negroes engaged became considerable, but exact figures are for several reasons lacking. In the first place, free Negroes rarely served in separate battalions. They marched side by side with the white soldier, and in most cases, according to the War Department, even after making an extended research as to the names, organizations, and numbers, the results would be that little can be obtained from the records to show exactly what soldiers were white and what were colored.⁵¹ Moreover the first official efforts to keep the Negroes out of the army must not be regarded as having stopped such enlistments. As there was not any formal system of recruiting, black men continued to enlist “under various laws and sometimes under no law, and in defiance of law.” The records of every one of the original thirteen States show that each had colored troops. A Hessian officer observed in 1777 that “the Negro can take the field instead of his master; and, therefore, no regiment is to be seen in which there are not negroes in abundance, and among them there are able-bodied, strong and brave fellows.”⁵² “Here too,” said he, “there are many families of free negroes who live in good homes, have property and live just like the rest of the inhabitants.” In 1777 Alexander Scammell, Adjutant-General, made the following report as to the number and placement of the Negroes in the Continental Army:

⁵⁰ Ford, “Washington’s Writings,” VII, 371.

⁵¹ Letter from the Adjutant General of the U. S. War Department.

⁵² Schloezer’s “Briefwechsel,” IV, 365.

RETURN OF NEGROES IN THE ARMY, 24TH AUGUST, 1778

Brigades	Present	Sick, Absent	On Command	Total
North Carolina.....	42	10	6	58
Woodford.....	36	3	1	40
Muhlenburg.....	64	26	8	98
Smallwood.....	20	3	1	24
2d Maryland.....	43	15	2	60
Wayne.....	2	2
2d Pennsylvania.....	33	1	1	35
Clinton.....	33	2	4	62
Parsons.....	117	12	19	148
Huntington.....	56	2	4	62
Nixon.....	26	..	1	27
Paterson.....	64	13	12	89
Late Learned.....	34	4	8	46
Poor.....	16	7	4	27
Total.....	586	98	71	755

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Adj.-Gen.^{52a}

But this report neither included the Negro soldiers enlisted in several other States nor those that joined the army later. Other records show that Negroes served in as many as 18 brigades.

Some idea of the number of Negroes engaged may be obtained from the context of documents mentioning the action taken by States. Rhode Island we have observed undertook to raise a regiment of slaves. Governor Cooke said that the slaves found there were not many but that it was generally thought that 300 or more would enlist. Four companies of emancipated slaves were finally formed in that State at a cost of £10,437 7s 7d.⁵³ Most of the 629 slaves then found in New Hampshire availed themselves of the opportunity to gain their freedom by enlistment as did many of the 15,000 slaves in New York. Connecticut had free Negroes in its regiments and formed also a regiment of colored soldiers assigned first to Meigs' and afterward to Butler's command. Maryland resolved in 1781 to raise 750 Negroes to be incorporated with the other troops. Massachusetts thought of forming a separate battalion of Negroes and Indians but had no separate Negro regiment, the Negroes

^{52a} The Washington Manuscripts in the Library of Congress.

⁵³ "The Spirit of '76 in Rhode Island," 186-188.

having been admitted into the other battalions, after 1778, to the extent that there were colored troops from 72 towns in that State. In view of these numerous facts it is safe to conclude that there were at least 4,000 Negro soldiers scattered throughout the Continental Army.

As to the value of the services rendered by the colored troops we have only one witness to the contrary. This was Sidney S. Rider. He tried to ridicule the black troops engaged in the Battle of Rhode Island and contended that only a few of them took part in the contest.⁵⁴ On the other hand we have two distinguished witnesses in their favor. The Marquis de Chastellux said that "at the passage to the ferry I met a detachment of the Rhode Island regiment, the same corps we had with us the last summer, but they have since been recruited and clothed. The greatest part of them are Negroes or Mulattoes; but they are strong, robust men, and those I have seen had a very good appearance."⁵⁵ Speaking of the behavior of troops, among whom Negroes under General Greene fought on this occasion, Lafayette said the following day, that the enemy repeated the attempt three times (tried to carry his position), and were as often repulsed with great bravery.⁵⁶ One hundred and forty-four of the soldiers thus engaged to roll back the lines of the enemy were, according to the Revolutionary records, Negroes.⁵⁷ Doctor Harris, a Revolutionary soldier, who took part in the Battle of Rhode Island, said of these Negroes: "Had they been unfaithful or even given away before the enemy all would have been lost. Three times in succession they were attacked with more desperate valor and fury by well disciplined and veteran troops, and three times did they successfully repel the assault and thus preserved our army from capture."⁵⁸ A detachment of these troops sacrificed themselves to the last man in defending Colonel Greene in 1781

⁵⁴ Sidney S. Rider, "An Historical Tract in the Rhode Island Series," No. 10.

⁵⁵ Marquis de Chastellux, "Travels," I, 454.

⁵⁶ Moore, "Historical Notes," 19.

⁵⁷ "The Spirit of Rhode Island in '76," 186-188.

⁵⁸ Washington, "The Story of the Negro," I, 311, Note.

when he was attacked at Point Bridge, New York. A Negro slave of South Carolina rendered Governor Rutledge such valuable service that by a special act of the legislature in 1783 his wife and children were enfranchised.⁵⁹

The valor of the Negro soldiers of the American Revolution has been highly praised by statesmen and historians. Writing to John Adams, a member of the Continental Congress, in 1775, to express his surprise at the prejudice against the colored troops in the South, General Thomas said: "We have some Negroes but I look on them in general equally serviceable with other men for fatigue, and in action many of them had proved themselves brave." Graydon in speaking of the Negro troops he saw in Glover's regiment at Marblehead, Massachusetts, said: "But even in this regiment (a fine one) there were a number of Negroes."⁶⁰ Referring to the battle of Monmouth, Bancroft said: "Nor may history omit to record that, of the 'revolutionary patriots' who on that day perilled life for their country, more than seven hundred black men fought side by side with the white."⁶¹ According to Lecky, "the Negroes proved excellent soldiers: in a hard fought battle that secured the retreat of Sullivan they three times drove back a large body of Hessians."⁶² We need no better evidence of the effective service of the Negro soldier than the manner in which the best people of Georgia honored Austin Dabney,⁶³ a mu-

⁵⁹ Moore, "Historical Notes," 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶¹ Bancroft, "History of the United States," X, 133.

⁶² Lecky, "American Revolution," 364.

⁶³ Austin Dabney, a remarkable free man of color, died at Zebulon. His remains repose, we understand, near those of his friend Harris. The following account of Dabney, as given by Governor Gilmer, may be interesting:

In the beginning of the Revolutionary conflict, a man by the name of Aycock removed to Wilkes County, having in his possession a mulatto boy, who passed for and was treated as his slave. The boy had been called Austin, to which the captain to whose company he was attached added Dabney.

Dabney proved himself a good soldier. In many a skirmish with the British and Tories, he acted a conspicuous part. He was with Colonel Elijah Clarke in the battle of Kettle Creek, and was severely wounded by a rifleball passing through his thigh, by which he was made a cripple for life. He was unable

latto boy who took a conspicuous part in many skirmishes with the British and Tories in Georgia. While fighting

to do further military duty, and was without means to procure due attention to his wound, which threatened his life. In this suffering condition he was taken into the house of a Mr. Harris, where he was kindly cared for until he recovered. He afterwards labored for Harris and his family more faithfully than any slave could have been made to do.

After the close of the war, when prosperous times came, Austin Dabney acquired property. In the year 18—, he removed to Madison County, carrying with him his benefactor and family. Here he became noted for his great fondness for horses and the turf. He attended all the races in the neighboring counties, and betted to the extent of his means. His courteous behavior and good temper always secured him gentlemen backers. His means were aided by a pension which he received from the United States.

In the distribution of the public lands by lottery among the people of Georgia, the Legislature gave to Dabney a lot of land in the county of Walton. The Hon. Mr. Upson, then a representative from Oglethorpe, was the member who moved the passage of the law, giving him the lot of land.

At the election for members of the Legislature the year after, the County of Madison was distracted by the animosity and strife of an Austin Dabney and an Anti-Austin Dabney party. Many of the people were highly incensed that a mulatto negro should receive a gift of the land which belonged to the freemen of Georgia. Dabney soon after removed to the land given him by the State, and carried with him the family of Harris, and continued to labor for them, and appropriated whatever he made for their support, except what was necessary for his coarse clothing and food. Upon his death, he left them all his property. The eldest son of his benefactor he sent to Franklin College, and afterwards supported him whilst he studied law with Mr. Upson, in Lexington. When Harris was undergoing his examination, Austin was standing outside of the bar, exhibiting great anxiety in his countenance; and when his young protégé was sworn in, he burst into a flood of tears. He understood his situation very well, and never was guilty of impertinence. He was one of the best chroniclers of the events of the Revolutionary War, in Georgia. Judge Dooly thought much of him, for he had served under his father, Colonel Dooly. It was Dabney's custom to be at the public house in Madison, where the judge stopped during court, and he took much pains in seeing his horse well attended to. He frequently came into the room where the judges and lawyers were assembled on the evening before the court, and seated himself upon a stool or some low place, where he would commence a parley with any one who chose to talk with him.

He drew his pension in Savannah where he went once a year for this purpose. On one occasion he went to Savannah in company with his neighbor, Colonel Wyley Pope. They traveled together on the most familiar terms until they arrived in the streets of the town. Then the Colonel observed to Austin that he was a man of sense, and knew that it was not suitable to be seen riding side by side with a colored man through the streets of Savannah; to which Austin replied that he understood that matter very well. Accordingly when they

under Colonel Elijah Clarke he was severely wounded by a bullet which in passing through his thigh made him a cripple for life. He received a pension from the United States and was by an act of the legislature of Georgia given a tract of land. He improved his opportunities, acquired other property, lived on terms of equality with some of his white neighbors, had the respect and confidence of high officials, and died mourned by all.

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came to the principal street, Austin checked his horse and fell behind. They had not gone very far before Colonel Pope passed the house of General James Jackson who was then governor of the state. Upon looking back he saw the governor run out of the house, seize Austin's hand, shake it as if he had been his long absent brother, draw him from his horse, and carry him into his house, where he stayed whilst in town. Colonel Pope used to tell this anecdote with much glee, adding that he felt chagrined when he ascertained that whilst he passed his time at a tavern, unknown and uncared for, Austin was the honored guest of the governor.

White's "Historical Collections," 584.